

Do You Speak Visitor?

Who is your customer?

One of the most common mistakes we make in trying to attract visitors to history-related destinations is to get ahead of ourselves. We do this because it is our natural inclination to talk about the history we are charged with sharing with the public. Yes, we are passionate about history, and more specifically the history of the place or subject in our museum or historic site. The tendency is to talk about things like how big our museum is, the historical importance of the place, or simply about why our place matters and should be supported with a visit (or even membership and donation dollars).

The challenge with this approach is that, while we know people should visit us, we haven't really given them their reasons to visit and support us. We make the common mistake of giving them our reasons they should visit us. And one of the main reasons for that is we often don't understand what it is we are selling to the public. Yes, I said selling. Whether we like it or not, getting people to visit our sites is a transaction. A transaction that involves time and dollars. And people have sophisticated ways of determining how they will spend their precious time and money. So then, our task is to figure out how to communicate why we are worth the effort.

So, what is this thing we are selling? Is it the learning process about a place or subject? If it were, we could simply talk about what is in our museum or the historical significance of our site. But the truth is, we are not selling a museum, historical site, or even the history itself. What we are selling is our visitors' experience at our site. And that experience is unique to each visitor.

Who is your customer? Staff Photo

We don't realize we do this, but it is human nature to think of others in terms of who we are. We like to think of ourselves as "normal", using our mores, interests, and preferences to define that normal. In terms of our topic this morning, we tend to see our customer as being much like us. After all, doesn't it make sense that people visiting a museum or historical site have a similar interest and passion than us? Like these people here – yes, they are the staff at a museum, but simply remove the name badges and they are just like our visitors, right? Wrong!

And that is the first lesson of marketing – we are not marketing to ourselves or people like us. Ask yourself how much you know about or are interested in the design and construction of shoes? Or maybe cars. Or perhaps how a concert is rehearsed and produced. These may all be things you purchase, do or participate in, but are not passionate about. And our visitors are, for the most part just like shoe buyers, car purchasing, and concert goers.

Who is your customer? Family Photos

In all the cases I just mentioned, the customer is looking to fulfill a need. To walk comfortably, to have reliable transportation, and to enjoy some live music. So, how did they decide which shoe to purchase, which car to buy, and which concert to go to? The way we make all of our buying decisions. As consumers, we evaluate our options based on three factors.

Trust

Value

Need Fulfillment

Notice that I put need fulfillment last. Why, because, without the first two, you don't have a chance at the last factor. Fortunately, for those of us in the history field, trust is almost a given. Almost – we still have to convince potential visitors they can trust us with what is most precious to them – their children and their time. Our places have an inherent credibility because of our status as a community asset and authority.

As to value, this is a bit trickier. Yes, our admission costs are usually lower than other forms of entertainment – yes entertainment. However, if potential visitors don't perceive the experience as fulfilling a need, that value can be much lower than we wish. And that goes back to the concept of describing what we do in visitor terms instead of ours. When we use their words, we are echoing back their needs. Sounds simple ... and it really is.

And that is the crux of the issue and why speaking visitor is so vital to attracting visitors.

A visitor cannot value what you do until they actually arrive and experience what you have to offer. Don't try to sell your organizational value in your marketing, sell your ability to deliver a desired experience.

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THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT

The product we are selling is people's perception of what they will experience when they visit.

When they visit, what is delivered must meet that expectation.

If you try something and it fails, it is NEVER your customer's fault.

We do not get to decide how people will react to what you say and do.

Why do cultural and heritage organizations let the for-profit world corner the market on saying they make people's lives better?

Corporate Logos

History Logos

A Picture is worth a thousand words

How to Talk About History so the General Public Will Care

Use their words, not yours

Develop an exit survey

Create a page on Trip Advisor and read the comments

Avoid talking about quantitative numbers

Always assume people are interested, but do not know you exist

Which is more important –

What you want to say or what the visitor needs to hear?

First person, not third person

Tell stories, don't invite.

Don't ask people to attend, describe the experience to create a desire to attend.

Don't try to be too clever.

Trip Advisor visitor review

If you are in this area, a must see!

We traveled about 2 hours and were glad we did.

A great glimpse into an area that can be touchy.

The interpreters were wonderful!

QUESTIONS?